

Drouth is upon the Shortgrass Country. At the time of this writing, we still have 36 hours, 36 minutes and 14 seconds left to get the first rain in September of '79

Out here in the big corridor of dryness, surveyors are keeping their stakes in five gallon buckets of water to keep them from splitting. Old cows bed down from fatigue instead of from full stomachs. Ewes and lambs bleat way after dark in search of browse or grass to drive away their hunger.

In the past 15 days, cow trails have doubled in width and cut down about six inches into the ground. It's thrilling to follow a few cows and calves toward the shipping pens, the afternoon heat and the perpetual dusty haze challenges man and his mount to go on with their day.

Yesterday, I missed my nap but made one of these miniature trail drives. I was going along half asleep when a flashback of the drouth of the '50's crossed my mind as sharp as the high focus of a German camera.

Four thousand round bales of rotten government hay were rolling down a bare rocky hill. Within the hay slide were 16 unpapered Mexican aliens carrying straw bags and wearing rawhide sandals soled with black rubber tires. Mixed in the stampede was a string of thin, humped-back cows, bawling and slinging saliva against patches of dead hair covering their rib cages. Sixty head of sheep, I guessed, tailed behind, pacing out an exercise of the drouth-stricken woolly.

I flinched so hard that my horse shied from the sudden movement. His maternal grandfather died in the drouth of the '50's. Damndest thing you ever saw. He (the stallion) was demanding respect from his band of mares at a waterhole. He made a lunge in the direction of the tank dam and drove a piece of bent-over pipe deep into his brisket. Lots of crazy things happen during a drouth. Bad things and sad things seem to come when you can least afford them.

I resolved right then that if this dry spell turns out to be a rerun of the '50's, I'm going to avoid a number of dry weather remedies. For example, I am not going to sign up for any government feed programs. Not because of any high ideals but because of my difference in opinion of what the government calls hay and I classify as bedding straw.

Also, the hombres that get enough rain to offer pasturage are going to look for someone else to stock their country. The only thing I'm ever going to rent again by the month is going to be a seaside cottage down on the coast.

The same goes for running from the drouth. The best drouth race that was ever run was from the ranch to the auction block. All the others were losing

propositions that came close to killing off one generation of San Angelo bankers.

Today in these last hours of September, I don't think this is the start of the big one. Winter is coming on mighty fast, but frost isn't going to hurt the dead grass much.

I've discarded 500 ideas to the last few days. Maybe spring will come early again like it did last March.